

Narrating 1989: The European Historical Writing and the Fall of the Wall

Veranstalter: Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici, Università del Piemonte Orientale

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What do we make of 1989 thirty years after? How do personal experiences shape memories and relate to more detached and professional investigations? These were some of the key issues Edoardo Tortarolo (University of Eastern Piedmont, Vercelli) put on the floor of the workshop he organized on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the Fall of the Berlin Wall.

The first session was started by GUIDO FRANZINETTI (University of Eastern Piedmont, Vercelli). His presentation focused on Poland and the exceptional nature of the political change the country experienced in 1989. Challenging the traditional interpretations by public commentators, journalists, politicians, social scientists and professional historians, Franzinetti recalled the various stages Poland went through becoming the only country of the Warsaw Pact Bloc which actually carried out a political transition through (almost) free elections in June 1989, before the falling of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet system in the following two years.

The second speaker, STEFANO BOTTONI (University of Florence) discussed the legacy of 1989 in Orbán's Hungary. Bottoni's presentation of 1989 Hungary's firstly economic and then political transformations emphasized the contrasts with current attempts to re-mould the public memory of 1989 as part of a more general and ideological program set by the present Hungarian government in order to challenge the Western discursive monopoly over modernization and acquire consent and legitimation for Hungary's democratic setback, exposing particularly some of the paradoxical features which have characterized the Hungarian autocratic turn of Viktor Orbán nowadays.

The reshaping of memory was at the centre of MURIEL BLAIVE's (Institute for the Study

of Totalitarian Regimes, Praha) argumentation. She provided a detailed analysis of what she called «the rise and fall of 1989 mythology» in the Slovak and Czech popular imagination. The opening of the archives arouse a series of harsh controversies around the public memory of 1989, affecting the demise of a dissident centered reconstruction of the events and opening up the consolidation of a more disenchanting vision of the Communist régime in Czechoslovakia.

Referring to the changes in Eastern European historical studies in the first fifteen years after the fall of state Communism, SORIN ANTOHI (Orbis Tertius Association, Bucharest) focused his speech on the forms of narrative strategies prevailing in Romania. By analyzing several modes of emplotment (together with their interplay, mimetic competition, legitimating potential and effects) and discussing some of their sources, authors and features, Antohi singled out the peculiarities of the Romanian «gothic tale of 1989», a master narrative endowing Romania's December 1989 violent uprising with a revolutionary meaning it did not to have if one considers the predominance of continuities in the country afterwards.

1989 had different impact in the Balkans: as RIGELS HALILI (University of Warsaw) argued, in countries such as Albania and former Yugoslavia the so-called „Autumn of the People“ took on a peculiar path because of the autochthonous configuration of Balkan Communism and the surge of tensions around issues of ethnicity and nationalism. Altogether these elements still make the public remembrance and disentanglement of 1989 events a challenging issue for all the area.

Bringing back the focus on Central Europe and the ex GDR in particular, MATTHIAS MIDDELL (Universität Leipzig) highlighted the risk of amplifying the voice of current centers of power and reading 1989 revolutions from a Eurocentric and 'romantic' point of view. He stressed the transnational dimension of 1989, no longer a story that happened in Eastern Europe alone, because of its connections and impact on a worldly scale.

In the last session GIULIA BASSI (University of Eastern Piedmont) considered the interpretation of 1989 (or rather its absence)

by the Italian Communist Party official history. In Bassi's presentation, many examples showed the marginalization or defusing of 1989 among Italian Communist and post-Communist intelligentsia, at odds to come to terms with the discontinuities 1989 sparked off. With another historiographical contribution, Guido Franzinetti then made the point on the ways 1989 was embedded in a larger history of the 20th and 21st centuries by some of the more prominent commentators: Fukuyama and Timothy Garton Ash, Eric Hobsbawm, Mark Mazower and Tony Judt, from different angles and with personal sensibilities, authored successful and authoritative 'new histories', all recognizing 1989 as a turning point but also as only one of the elements into a broader historical framework.

In conclusion, and from many suggestions stemming from the final Round Table, a varied and entangled narration of 1989 came out, depending on a plurality of factors, national settings and historiographical traditions: far from univocal, 1989 has emerged as a sort of variable prism, whose different faces and reflections have changed over the last 30 years. Some of these changes indeed were targeted and lit up by the participants to the Vercelli Workshop.

Programme

Thursday 17 October

I session, h. 14.30-18

Chair: Edoardo Tortarolo, University of Eastern Piedmont

The Polish Exception

- Guido Franzinetti, University of Eastern Piedmont

Exception or new standard? Orbán's Hungary and the legacy of 1989

- Stefano Bottoni, University of Florence

Narrating 1989 in Czech Republic

- Muriel Blaive, Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, Praha

Friday 18 October

II session, h. 9.30-12.30

Chair: Muriel Blaive, Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, Praha

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Narrating 1989 in Germany

- Matthias Middell, Universität Leipzig

Annus mirabilis or annus domini. 1989 in the Balkans in a comparative perspective

- Rigels Halili, University of Warsaw

1989 and the Italian Communist Historiography

- Giulia Bassi, University of Eastern Piedmont

III session, h. 14.30-18

Chair: Marco Mariano, University of Turin

Narrating Romania's December 1989: Gothic Tales, State Lies, Civic Mythologies

- Sorin Antohi, Orbis Tertius Association, Bucharest

1989 and the New Histories of the Twentieth Century

- Guido Franzinetti, University of Eastern Piedmont

Round Table

Tagungsbericht *Narrating 1989: The European Historical Writing and the Fall of the Wall*.

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